

1998

## Book discussions : guiding students in creating their own questioning

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### Recommended Citation

Matthew, Christine, "Book discussions : guiding students in creating their own questioning" (1998).  
*Graduate Research Papers*. 1156.

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## Book discussions : guiding students in creating their own questioning

### Abstract

Book discussions increase the understanding and personal meaning of books through the students' active participation during the reading process. Previous to book discussions the students would give a statement from the book or paraphrase the book. With the new format students are able to talk about the character's feelings, predict the happenings in the story, discuss the circumstances in the story and how the story could have been written differently.

The success of the book discussions makes it an easy decision to continue the program. This process is very enjoyable and can be adapted for any classroom and teacher. The outcomes can be amazing.

Book discussions:  
Guiding students in creating their own questioning

A Graduate Journal Article Paper  
Submitted to the  
Division of Reading and Language Arts  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by  
Christine Matthew  
April 1998

This Journal Article Paper by: Christine Matthew

Titled: Book discussions: Guiding students in creating their own questioning

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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In the past, talk in the classroom was often regarded as “cheating,” as “not doing your own work,” or as one teacher put it , “If your mouth is engaged, your brain is not” (Hepler, 1991). Today many teachers are being made aware of the need to go beyond teacher-directed questioning of literature that requires a “right answer” or recitation of the literature read. These teachers are realizing that limited answers to questions are not promoting comprehension of the text beyond the written words. One of the areas recognized as requiring special attention is the need for young children to develop questioning strategies so they can clarify, question, and discuss their reading independently to create a personal meaning of the text. This development of meaning shows how important “ talk” is to thinking, writing, and developing a social structure in the classroom that supports learning (Hepler,1991).

Moving beyond simple recall of sequences of events and specific facts in text comprehension, teachers now place importance on children understanding the character’s feelings in a story and how the text relates to their previous experiences and knowledge. Such connections help readers become more critical in their thinking about and interacting with text, and this is an important skill. Students need to become critical thinkers in order to cope with the complexity of the information age because as citizens and consumers they will be bombarded with conflicting information. Thus, placing more emphasis on critical thinking in reading instruction will help prepare the next generation to think carefully about complex issues.(Commeyras, 1993). This critical thinking can be developed through classroom discussion. Discussion actively involves students in thinking, reasoning, comprehending, and understanding ideas (Goldenberg, 1993). Through this process, oral performances and instructional cues are woven together constructing personal meanings which are confirmed, extended, and refined as children share their interpretations and add to other’s observations (Golden & Gerber, 1990: Golden, Meineers, & Stanley, 1992). Students are able to

comprehend and remember more when they actively participate in discussions (Barton, 1995; Gambrell, 1996). The social construction of meaning is created as individuals read and write to reflect who they are and what they have experienced, what they know about language and the world and what the purpose is for creating meaning (Cairney, 1990a, 1990b, 1995). This will help students develop this basic social skill in order for their discussions to lead to better comprehension of the written words.

Students learn basic discussion skills through listening to others and adding to the ideas being discussed (Lehman & Scharer, 1996). Students can be taught to think about questions while listening to stories and using phrases such as: What do you notice? What do you feel? What do you question? What do you relate to? (Berger, 1996) Teachers need to recognize the importance of allowing students to communicate with one another and to develop turn taking skills of their own accord. Discussion brings together listening, speaking, and thinking skills as participants engage in speaking and interaction with each other, as ideas are exchanged, interpreted, and clarified, eliciting responses and reactions to text as well as to the ideas of others (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996).

Students' discussion skills will improve with multiple language opportunities (Barton, 1995). Research has shown that when children use "thematic-fantasy play" (Pellegrini & Galda, 1982) or dramatization, the children demonstrate comprehension of the sequences, dialogue, main ideas, and details of the story through their reenactments, discussions, and play (Ross & Roe, 1977). Dramatization presents itself in the form of constructive play, recall of the sequences of events, and comprehension of the text meaning. Students need to develop the questioning process in order to locate specific information, make inferences, apply original ideas to a new context, connect one subject area to related topics, and ask questions that relate to their

experiences (Barton, 1995). Discussion skill development can also be shown by collecting discussion responses about reading in language charts (Roser & Hoffman, 1992). When teachers engage students in these activities the students are actively learning and the teacher has opportunities to learn about the students.

When teachers observe children during discussions, they view a portion of the student's thought process (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996) while creating enjoyment for students in relating to and understanding books (Gambrell, 1996). Through creative drama teachers can observe all of the major language arts: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Ross & Roe, 1997).

### **Getting Started**

Early in the school year I started reading Lively Discussions!: Fostering Engaged Reading, and as a result decided to change my discussions to active student-led discussions. My kindergarten class consisted of twenty-two children with varying backgrounds of ability such as: language skills, prior knowledge, and socioeconomic level. I divided the class into three heterogeneous groups.

### **Process and procedures**

Each group consisting of seven to eight children allowed each individual student to become actively involved, although in the beginning several students in each group contributed a small amount. The group's excitement seemed to rise as time passed encompassing those children who took an inactive part in their group discussions. Eventually all the students wanted to contribute and have their opinions heard. This change may have taken place because now all opinions were acceptable. Each student realized that the group was interested in hearing their personal ideas. This was reaffirmed when students used phrases such as: You are right! or What did you think about the ending? The reserved student felt their responses were more valued when the next student added on to the response to show agreement with the statement. The members of the group remained the same throughout the year and the

groups became very supportive of each member.

### **Class structure**

Each group met with me once every three days for approximately one hour.

While I worked with the small group, the other students looked at other literature selections, wrote in journals, created stories, or reenacted stories with puppets. The class was fortunate to have a paraprofessional that acted as the facilitator for the children working on their own. The students were self-motivated and very impressed with the end products. When a discussion group finished working with me, I gave them a question or statement relating to the literature read. They were to respond in their journal at this time and everyone in the room was required to work on journaling.

### **Anecdotal notes**

While the whole class was journaling I had time to record anecdotal notes. My observations contained information on each student's participation as a group member in the discussion process. I kept track of student's comments that exceeded or fell short of my expectations. New skills obtained by individual students and areas of improvement needed were also noted. These notes were useful to share with parents to show their child's progress. Also, the anecdotal notes were used to create mini lessons for a group of children having similar difficulties.

### **Finding a topic**

The class brainstormed a list of interesting topics and then narrowed the list to the topic of rabbits. Then as a class, we listed all the things we knew about rabbits and made another list of what we would like to learn about rabbits (see the table on the next page). Then we brainstormed ways to find different resources available. The following day approximately half of the students brought books and information from home and even from the public library. This led other students to gather additional books from the school library representing information from a variety of sources.

### Things We Know

They have lots of babies.  
They can be pets.  
They eat carrots.  
They come in all colors.  
They have long ears.  
Dogs and wolves eat them.  
They live in burrows or hutches.  
They can be real or stuffed.

### Things We Would Like to Learn

How many kinds of rabbits are there?  
How many babies do they have?  
How old do they live?  
Why does their nose move all the time?  
Do they hibernate?  
What is the biggest rabbit?

### Resources

Class books  
School library  
Books at home  
Karen (Conservation officer)  
Public Library  
Veterinarian

I thought it was important to establish rules that would be followed during the group discussions. Students helped develop the rules and then were encouraged to remind others if the rules were not followed. Each of the three groups met briefly with me to compile a list of classroom discussion etiquette. The groups compiled very similar lists. Then we met as a whole class to combine the lists of rules. Next, I felt the need to prioritize and narrow the range of rules. Then, I polled the class as a whole resulting in the following four rules.

No put downs.

Stay on the topic.

Be a good listener.

One person can talk at a time.

During the next session of small group meetings I led them through a book discussion focusing on topics we might discuss in our small groups. We talked about the way information could be gathered: by looking at the book's illustrations, listening

to the text of the story, adding to previous knowledge or personal experiences related to the story, or going beyond the text to draw conclusions or make changes in the story resulting in different scenarios.

### **Starting book discussions**

The ground work was set, and we were ready to begin our group discussions. Discussion time began with a student randomly chosen to make a selection from the previously gathered books. The story I read for the students was presented so the illustrations could be viewed as the text was read. This allowed the students to see the interpretations of the text by the illustrator. Then the students could form a mental picture of the story by adding personal experiences or knowledge to the written text. As I read the books I paused periodically to allow students time to discuss the story. If there was silence I used open ended questions such as: What do you notice? What do you feel? What do you question? What do you relate to? What do you think will happen next?(Berger, 1996) The first stories were difficult for the students and for me because the children were expecting me to control the questions and give correct answers. This process having been repeated several times, led the students into discussions about the stories and to answer several of Berger's discussion questions which I had previously modeled. The students had begun the process of leading the discussions thus transforming my role from leader to facilitator.

### **Extending discussion thoughts**

As a facilitator I encouraged students to discuss and interact more. When a student gave a short response and I felt the child could provide additional insight in the discussion, I would repeat the last three words or three key words the student said or add "and..." to prompt the student to write or add more to his/her previous thoughts. When adding "and..." to the end of a response the student was allowed additional time to provide more detail or reasoning to the comments already stated. The student now realizing that the group is interested in hearing more elaboration and having created

greater confidence in the discussion process is willing to provide more detailed answers rather than nondescript responses. This was demonstrated after reading the Aesop Fable, The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse. One student commented that the country mouse just didn't like the town. And I responded by asking, "Didn't like the town?" And the student responded, "Well, he just wasn't use to that life. It's all what you're use to doing. And he didn't like change." Then I continued by stating, "And..." At this point the student started to compare the differences and other students chimed in with more comparisons.

### **Developing Questioning Skills**

During the next month while using the discussion process students were gaining the ability to discuss ideas with each other and to explain their point of view. My class was becoming proficient in going beyond the written text by explaining how a character was feeling and what was creating those feelings. Yet, they were having difficulty in accurately recalling facts from the story. While discussing Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter, the students' comments reflected that they understood that Peter was eating Mr. McGregor's vegetables. However, when listing the vegetables Peter ate, students substituted vegetables that were not mentioned in the story. The continual inability of students to recall facts from the story led to the use of "Right There" questions and "On My Own" questions (Raphael, 1982). Since kindergarten students are able to articulate ideas from the story and find where the ideas correspond with the text these steps were developmentally appropriate to make students aware of the answers found in the text or thoughts supported by the text. I recorded the students' questions on two different pieces of chart paper. On one piece of paper I recorded "Right There" questions that could be answered right from the text, for example: How many people were in Peter Rabbit's family?, What happened to Peter Rabbit's father? The "On My Own" questions asked the students to think about their own ideas and generate questions, through use of inference skills and originality in using actual story

information. These questions were: Why didn't Peter Rabbit listen to his mother? Why didn't Mr. McGregor like rabbits? To compile "Right There" questions the students picked their own partner and looked at the books to find facts and discuss what question they could ask others in order to arrive at this fact.

### **Mystery Box**

Many groups were unable to compile a question that would go with their fact. Since each group was having difficulty creating "Right There" questions we practiced by using a mystery box. I placed an object in the box and I chose a student to look in the box. The student that looked at the object was responsible for calling on students and answering their questions. The students asked questions like: "How do you use the object?", "Where does it come from?", "What do you do with the object?". If a student thought they had figured out the mystery they would ask, "Is it a..." until they were able to figure out what the box contained. This activity allowed students to ask direct questions about the mystery item reinforcing the ability to create questions.

### **Character Representation**

An additional activity I used to improve the student's "On My Own" questions was using character representation after reading stories. Students took turns representing a character by clicking their heels three times and deciding which character in the story they would represent. The child responded as the character would to the question. After reading Brer Rabbit a student decided to represent the bear and another student asked, "Would you really eat Brer Rabbit?" The child representing the bear responded, "Well, of course, don't you know that bears like to eat rabbits?" The interaction represented the students' previous knowledge added to the text. Then they discussed whether or not this was the ethical thing for animals and people to do. When the questions started to dwindle another student was chosen to represent a different character. This activity helped the students see the connections between the storyline and how the character would respond to questions that could be

found in the book. Students had to use personal knowledge as well as knowledge from the story that would lead them to the answer, as well as knowledge of the character's personality and the way the character might have reacted in different circumstances.

### **Outcomes of book discussions**

Book discussions have led to many positive outcomes in my classroom.

Children who previously relied on others to control discussion began interacting in the small groups. They were learning to be contributing group members. The discussions changed from being teacher-led to student-led. Through active participation, group members could express their personal understanding of the story and exchange ideas to create a more complex comprehension of the text. Students became proficient at asking and answering questions while performing character representations. The discussion skills carried over into journaling. Students who usually drew pictures for their entries were writing their own stories and commenting on the literature that was previously discussed in small groups. The students' stories were modeled from the stories discussed in the small groups. Students improved discussion skills.

Knowledge of the content of published stories was evident when they exhibited the ability to discuss the spelling of words and what should be added to improve the entry when sharing journal entries with another student.

### **Final remarks**

Book discussions increased the understanding and personal meaning of books through the students' active participation during the reading process. Previous to the book discussions the students would give a statement from the book or paraphrase the book. With the new format students were able to talk about the character's feelings, predict the happenings in the story, discuss the circumstances in the story and how the story could have been written differently. All of the students were successful in actively participating in the discussions and learned to use their own words as well as words

from the book. The students took this enthusiasm home. Many parents were impressed with their child's ability to discuss books and the greater interest in reading and writing in the home. The discussions broadened into performance, writing in different forms, and have carried over into other areas of their lives. As found by Gilles, students' discussions created meaning that no one student could have created alone.

The anecdotal notes written throughout the entire process of the year gave concrete details of the accomplishments each child made and the areas in which each student had difficulty. Many of these accomplishments may not have been noticed without the implementation of book discussions and the journaling extension.

The success of the book discussions makes it an easy decision to continue the program. I expect to change the program somewhat to meet the needs of each new class. I would like to videotape some of the plays and character representations so parents and future classes can see the work students have produced. It would also be beneficial for students to share stories read on their own, with a partner, or small group. This process is very enjoyable and I believe it can be adapted for any classroom and teacher. The outcomes can be amazing.

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- synthesize or explain bodies of theory and research

Methodology should be reported in a concise manner, with strong emphasis placed on the applications and implications of the research findings.

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